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The Nagarathars of South India

S Chandrasekhar

Chettiars Temple Society Singapore

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The Nagarathars (more popularly known as the Nattukkottai Chettiars) who come from Tamil Nadu (Madras State) constitute a small sub-caste, considerably less than a quarter million of India's 650 million population. But as businessmen and bankers they are more influential than their numbers would seem to warrant. From village moneylenders in South India they emigrated to countries throughout South-East Asia where they have contributed significantly to the region's economic development.

This study, with an introductory essay and an extensive bibliography, outlines briefly the history of the community and some of its salient features.

A second volume will present a more detailed social survey of the Nagarathars.

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THE NAGARATHARS OF SOUTH INDIA

An Essay and a Bibliography on the Nagarathars in India and South-East Asia

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S. CHANDRASEKHAR

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DEDICATED TO
THE MEMORY OF

Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar (1881–1948), Dewan Bahadur M. RM. Ramaswamy Chettiar (1854–1918), M. CT. M. Chidambaram Chettiar (1908–1954), Dr. K. V. AL. RM. Alagappa Chettiar (1909–1957), Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar (1893–1974), AL. AR. Vellayan Chettiar (Zamindar of Devakottai) (1880–1945), A. M. M. Murugappa Chettiar (1902–1965), Pandithamani M. Kathiresan Chettiar (1881–1953), Raya Chockalingam Chettiar (1891–1974), Dewan Bahadur Dharmabhushanam T. N. Muthiah Chettiar (1841–1921) and So. Murugappa (1893–1956).

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PREFACE

For some years I have been interested in the social and economic characteristics of the Nagarathar (Nattukkottai Chettiar) community in South India. When I became Vice-Chancellor of Annamalai University in South India, founded half a century ago by a remarkable Nagarathar businessman and philanthropist after whom the University is named, I had an exceptional opportunity to study the community.

The Nagarathars are widely known in India and South-East Asia. Though small in numbers they are highly influential. And yet no serious study of the community had been made. Hence I decided to undertake a social survey of the Nagarathars.

On reviewing the available material it was decided that the survey could be published in two volumes. The first (and present) volume would deal with all the bibliographical materials on the Nagarathars available in English in various libraries in India and selected South-East Asian countries with an introductory essay. (A companion volume listing all the bibliographical items available in the Tamil language, with a Tamil translation of the introductory essay will be published later.)

The second and more substantial volume will deal with the growth and composition of the Nagarathar population, their marriage, family and fertility patterns, and their internal and external migration. It will also deal with their economic activities, ranging from village moneylending to international banking and large-scale industrialization. It will include the community's pioneering contribution to the economic development of Burma, Ceylon, Malaysia, Singapore, etc., as well as its philanthropic activities.

The research work connected with the survey was partly funded by kind donations from the Raja Sir M. A. Muthiah Chettiar, Shri AL. CT. Chidambaram Chettiar (Chidambaram Charity Trust), the A. M. M. Charities Trust, Shri A. V. Thyagaraja, Shri L. CT. L. Palaniappa Chettiar—all of Madras, Shri E. M. Viswanathan Chettiar of Pattukkottai, the Nagarathar Sangam of Madurai (Shri L. Alagusundaram Chettiar), the Nagarathar staff members of the Annamalai University, Shri Singaram Chettiar and his business colleagues in Chidambaram.

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In the collection of bibliographic and other material on the Nagarathars I have been assisted by many persons—Nagarathars and others—in India and abroad too numerous to mention.

However, I would like specially to thank Messrs ST. Sethu, RM. Subbiah, N. M. Nagappan, Tan Sri M. S. Sundaram, Palaniappa Chettiar of the All-Malaysian Nattukottai Chettiar Endowment, S. Singaravelu and S. V. A. Annamalai Chettiar for their kind help during my visits to Malaysia.

In Sri Lanka, Dr. W. S. Weerasooria and Messrs R. M. Kasi Viswanathan Chettiar, K. V. S. Vyas and Dr. Dharma Thirunavukkarasu have been most helpful, and Mr. K. R. Veerappan in Singapore.

At the Annamalai University Messrs L. B. Venkatarangan, A. Shanmugam, S. Ranganadha, S. Thirugnana-sambandam and V. Durairajan rendered valuable assistance, as did our five Research Scholars, Misses M. Valliammal, AR. Geetha, M. Sivakami, Mrs. Meenakshi Narayanan and Mrs. Radha Lakshmanan.

Outside the campus, I am indebted to Messrs K. Nagarajan, Dr. V. SP. Manickam, Dr. M. Sundaram, Dr. SP. Annamalai, M. V. Arunachalam, Pulavar Naga Shanmugam, K. G. Krishnan and AR. Ramaswamy for information. Mr. A. V. Thiagaraja took more than an ordinary interest in the entire study.

Miss K. Dharmambal, Messrs R. Subramanian and Edwin Samuel shared the burden of typing notes, correspondence and the manuscripts.

Last, but hardly least, I am beholden to my wife for perusing this study and seeing it through the press.

Some material from the Introductory essay and the forthcoming second volume were presented as three All-Malaya Nattukkottai Chettiar Endowment Fund Memorial Lectures at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, in August 1978. In this connection my thanks are due to the Nagarathars of the Endowment Fund committee and Dr. S. Singaravelu and Professors Mohd. Taib Bin Osman, Yip Yat Hoong and Tunku Shamsul Bahrin of the University of Malaya.

Kodaikanal, South India — S. Chandrasekhar
15 December 1978

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INTRODUCTION

I

THE GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: THE NATION, THE STATE AND THE DISTRICT

1. The Nation

Located on a vast ' tongue-shaped promontory that juts southwards from the continent of Asia ', India is well marked off from the rest of Asia by mountains and seas, stamping the country with an undeniable geographical unity as well as cultural isolation.

The country is bounded by the snow-capped Himalayas in the north, and tapering southward, by the Bay of Bengal on the south-east and the Arabian Sea on the south-west. On the east a series of mountain ranges separates India from independent Burma, which was once a province of the Indian empire under the British rule. (The then province of Burma, as we shall note later in our survey, plays an important part in the Nagarathars' overseas business operations.) To the east also lies independent Bangladesh, which came into existence as a new nation in December 1971 from its former position as the province of East Pakistan by seceding from the State of Pakistan, which is surrounded by the Indian territories of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. On the north-east, besides independent Nepal, lie the State of Sikkim, which is now politically integrated into India as a new State, and Bhutan, attached to India by a special treaty and as such considered a part of India. The independent nations of Pakistan (the former West Pakistan province) and Afghanistan border India on the north-west. In the south, the gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait separate India from independent Sri Lanka (Ceylon). (The former British Ceylon also plays, as we shall note later in our survey, an important role in the overseas operations of the Nagarathars.) The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal and Laksha-

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dweep Islands (the Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands) in the Arabian Sea are part of India's territory.

India has a land frontier 9,425 miles (15,200 km) long — actually a bit longer than the earth's diameter — and a coastline of 3,535 miles (6,083 km) which is roughly the distance from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast of the United States of America.

With an area of 1.2 million square miles (3,280,483 sq. km) India is about a third of the area of the continental United States of America excluding Alaska. India stretches about 2,000 miles (3,218 km) from Kashmir in the north to Cape Comorin or Kanyakumari in the south and about 1,850 miles (2,977 km) from Kutch in Gujarat in the west to Kohima in Assam in the east. The country lies entirely in the northern hemisphere and extends between latitudes 8° and 37° and longitudes 68° and 97°.

In the world, India is the second most populous and seventh largest country in area. The People's Republic of China with a 1978 estimated population of more than 900 million is the world's most populous nation; in area the first six largest nations are the Soviet Union, Canada, Peoples Republic of China, Brazil, the United States of America and Australia. The country's population in mid-1978 was estimated to have passed the 630 million mark, while its area, as already pointed out, is 1.2 million square miles.

2. The State: Tamil Nadu (Madras State)

The country, constitutionally a federal republic, is divided for administrative and other purposes into twenty-two states, roughly on the basis of the language spoken by the people. The evolution of the boundaries of these states from the pre-British and British times down to the linguistic reorganization of the Indian map by the Government of India in 1956 is a fascinating subject but it need not detain us here.[1]

In most countries of the world, the south is often considerably different from the north and has a culture and personality of its own, and India is no exception to this rule. This cultural differen-

[1] S. Chandrasekhar, 'The New Map of India', *Population Review* (Madras), January 1957, Vol. I, No. 1.

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tial is generally a product of ethnic, linguistic and climatic differences. While waves of foreign invasions have shaken and shaped the north and some invaders even took near permanent shelter there, the south, by and large, has been unaffected by foreign intruders. Although it is true that the last of the invaders, the Europeans who came by sea, started at Madras in 1639, most of the other alien groups never reached the south or, when they did, were nearly a spent force. This fortunate historical circumstance has led to a remarkable degree of political stability and cultural continuity in the evolution of a distinct and distinguished culture and polity in South India which may be generically described as Dravidian.

And of these four Dravidian South Indian States (Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh), Madras State, or, to give its modern linguistic title, Tamil Nadu (literally, land of Tamils), is preeminently the cultural and linguistic heart and soul of Dravidian South India.

Of the four distinct southern languages, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam — constituting the Dravidian family of languages — Tamil is the Dravidian language *par excellence*, for it has the least link with such a northern Indo-Aryan language as Hindi and has a more ancient and renowned record of sacred and secular literature than the other three. (Some scholars believe that Tamil as a language is more ancient than Sanskrit, and is the mother of most of India's languages currently in vogue.)

Thus India has two major cultures — the Northern and Southern, the Indo-Aryan and Indo-Dravidian — with distinct modes of apparel and diet, a somewhat different social structure, and a definite general overall difference in life-styles.

Present-day Tamil Nadu has evolved from the sprawling Madras Presidency of the benighted British days which stretched from Malabar (which Malayalam-speaking district is now part of Kerala State) to Orissa (which is now a separate Oriya-speaking State on its own). The Madras Presidency lost first Orissa, and later, Andhra Pradesh was carved from it, leaving the fifteen largely Tamil-speaking districts to become Tamil Nadu including a little area, Kanyakumari and Nagercoil, carved out of the old princely State of Travancore which is now part of Kerala.

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Tamil Nadu has an area of 50,490 square miles (130,069 sq. km), roughly the size of England in Great Britain or the State of New York in the United States. According to the 1971 census the State's population was 41.2 million and the 1976 mid-year estimated population was about 44 million. The State is divided for administrative purposes into fifteen districts which in turn are divided into *taluks* (minor administrative divisions).

The original and traditional home of the present Nagarathars is called Chettinad (or the land of Chettis, ' nad ' being an anglicised form of the Tamil word ' nadu ' meaning land or territory).[2] According to traditional sources based both on temple inscriptions and references in literature, the area of Chettinad is described as lying south of the Vellar river (the traditional boundary between the ancient Tamil Chola and Pandyan Kingdoms), north of the Vaigai river, east of the Piranmalai (or Parambu hill) a peak of only 1,800 feet above sea level, and west of the sea (the Bay of Bengal).

3. Ramanathapuram and Pudukkottai Districts

According to tradition, which is not without some historical

[2]The lack of standardisation of the spelling of Indian names in English is both remarkable and unfortunate. It is in a state of utter confusion. When the States (Provinces) of the Indian Union were reorganised on the basis of language, the old Madras Presidency of the British Raj was bifurcated into the Telugu speaking northern part, named Andhra Pradesh, land of the Andhras, and the southern part, Tamil Nadu, land of the Tamils. It would have been better if the world-renowned name Madras had been left to designate the residual State but some minor politicians could not think of any greater or more serious reforms than mere change of name.

And here again there was confusion, lack of euphony and uniformity. Tamil Nad as one or two words would have sounded better but the powers that be who were no linguists insisted on the English rendering being the exact equivalent of the Tamil term, and hence Tamil Nadu. And here again there was no standardisation; for even officially the name is written as one or two words. On the other hand, as we shall see later, the name Chettinad is written as one word and without ' u ' at the end. We shall therefore follow throughout the essay Tamil Nadu and Chettinad.

I have spelt Indian names—particularly jaw-breaking Tamil ones—with a minimum of diacritical symbols and in a manner which appeals to common sense.

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supporting evidence, the Nagarathars migrated from Kaveri-poompattinam, the capital of the earlier Chola Kings (third century B.C. –second century A.D.) to what is now Chettinad. The original home, during the eighteenth century, consisted of some 96 villages. During the last two centuries Nagarathars from some of these villages have migrated to other parts of South India and to certain countries in South-East Asia in search of business opportunities. As a result, the Nagarathars are now distributed among some 78 villages — 58 of which are in the present-day Ramanathapuram[3] (the old Ramnad) district and 20 in the present Pudukkottai (the old small princely state) district.

4. Chettinad and its Villages

Chettinad, with an area of 656.7 sq. miles (1,700 sq. km), the original and traditional home of the Nagarathars, as already pointed out, is largely in the Ramnad district, on the Coromandel or Madras coast or within reach of it.

Historically, Chettinad is the name given to the original 96 villages of the Devakottah revenue division of Ramnad district and the Pudukkottah revenue division of Trichinopoly district.

The villages of present Chettinad are spread over four taluks, Tirupattur, Sivaganga and Thiruvadanai taluks in Ramnad district and Tirumayam Taluk in Pudukkottai district.

[3]Most of the names of the districts in Tamil Nadu have also been changed by the State Government into their proper Tamil names from the old anglicised names given by the British administration. Thus Ramnad has become Ramanathapuram, Trichinopoly has been changed to Tiruchirapalli, Madura to Madurai, Pudukkottah to Pudukkottai, etc. Several atlases prepared abroad still carry the old names. For the sake of quick identification the old anglicised forms are often used here.

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Table 1

A List of Nagarthar Villages in Tamil Nadu†

1. Alagapuri (Kottaiyur)
2. Alavakottai
3. Amaravathipudur
4. Aranmanai Siruvayal
5. Arimalam
6. Ariyakudi
7. Athikkadu Thekkur
8. Attangudi
9. Attangudi Muthupattinam*
10. Avanipatti
11. Chockalingam-Pudur (Chockanendal)
12. Chockanathapuram
13. Devakottai
14. Kaliarmangalam
15. Kallal
16. Kalluppatti
17. Kanadukathan
18. Kandanur
19. Kandavarayanpatti
20. Kandaramanickam
21. Karaikudi
22. Karunkulam
23. Kilapungudi
24. Kilasivalpatti (& P. Alagapuri)
25. Kollangudi Alagapuri
26. Konapet
27. Koppanapatti
28. Kothamangalam
29. Kottaiyur
30. Kulipirai
31. Kuruvikondanpatti
32. Lakshmipuram (Kothamangalam) Lakshmipuram)
33. Madagupatti (Chockalingapuram)
34. Mahibalanpatti
35. Managiri
36. Melasivapuri
37. Mithalaipatti
38. Nachandupatti
39. Nachiarpuram
40. Natarajapuram*
41. Nattarasankottai
42. Nemathanpatti
43. Nerkuppai
44. Okkur
45. Oyakondan Siruvayal
46. Paganeri
47. Palavangudi
48. Pallathur
49. Panangudi
50. Panayappatti
51. Pariamaruthupatti
52. Pattamangalam
53. Pilayarpatti
54. Ponnamaravathy
55. Pulankurichi
56. Puduppatti (Ponnamaravathy)
57. Puduvayal
58. Ramachandrapuram
59. Rangiam
60. Rajavaram
61. Sakkandi
62. Sekkalai (Karaikudi)
63. Sembanur
64. Sevvur
65. Shanmuganathapuram (Aravayal)
66. Siravayal
67. Sirukudalpatti
68. Solapuram
69. Thanichavurani*
70. Thenipatti
71. Ulagampatti
72. Valayapatti
73. Vegupatti
74. Vendhanpatti
75. Vethiyur
76. Virachilai
77. Viramathi* (Kilasivalpatti)
78. V. Lakshmipuram (Virachilai)

†The villages are listed in alphabetical order.
The spelling used by the Posts and Telegrphs Department is followed herein.
*This symbol denotes places having no Post Offices.
Words within parentheses are alternate names used locally.

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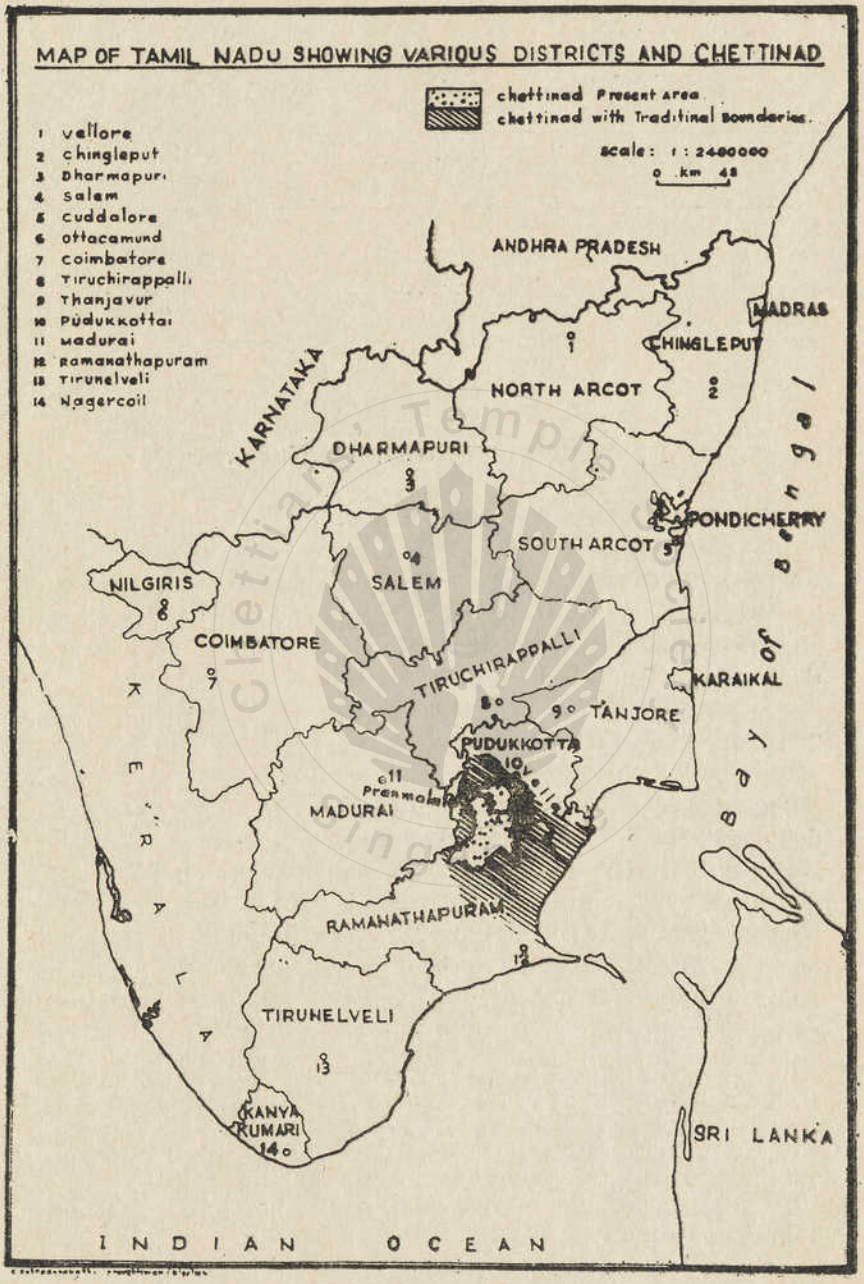

Tamil Nadu in South India

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TABLE 2
District and Taluk-wise Distribution of Chettinad Villages Today

District	Taluk	No. of Villages
Ramnad	Tirupattur	45
	Sivaganga	10
	Thiruvadanai	3
Pudukkottai	Tirumayam	20

II

'NAGARATHARS': THE COMMUNITY'S NAME

1. The Term 'Chetty' and its Origin

The word 'Chetty' or 'Chetti' is a very general term, more or less common to all South Indian languages and dialects, denoting all merchant and trading groups and business communities among the Hindus of South India.

2. Chetty from Etti

The etymological origin of the word 'Chetty' is a matter of some doubt and dispute. According to some scholars, the term 'Chetti' is traced to 'Etti',[4] an honorific conferred on affluent and leading merchants by Tamil rulers during the Chola (A.D. 846–1279) and later Pandyan times (A.D. 1190–1310). For example, we read of one Etti Sayalan, a rich merchant in *Silappadikaram*[5] and Etti Kumaran, also a merchant of Kaveri-poom-pattinam in *Manimegalai.*[6]

[4]In ancient Tamil country leading merchants were honoured with such titles as 'Etti' by royalty. Etti is a flowering plant and garlands made of etti flowers were presented to affluent merchants as a mark of honour.

[5]U. V. Saminatha Ayyar (ed.), *Silappadikaram of Ilangovadigal* (Madras: Thiyagaraja Vilasam, 1955), p. 395.

[6]U. V. Samanitha Ayyar (ed.), *Manimekalai of Seethalai Sathanar* (Madras: Thiyagaraja Vilasam, 1956), p. 47.

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It is believed that in the earlier centuries the local traders in the Tamil country were called ' Sattu ' and the overseas ones ' Nayagars '. And those businessmen who were successful enough in both internal and external trade to amass a fortune were honoured with the title ' Etti '. It is probable that the word ' Etti ' evolved in the course of a few centuries into ' Chetti '.

3. Chetty from Chettu

A second view is that the word ' Chetti ' is derived from the ancient Tamil word ' Chettee ' or ' Chettu ' which means a margin of profit earned in business. Some believe that the word ' Chetty ' is derived from the Tamil word *chikkanam* which means frugality or without waste. The word also connotes frugal habits, a sense of thrift and a life characterised by overall economy and careful management of money. Since the Chetty community today, despite great public generosity and lavish expenditure on such social occasions as weddings, leads a frugal, economic and even an austere life in private, it is thought that the genesis of the word must be traced to this particular parsimonious aspect of their domestic life. This view also derives some support from the fact that even today some merchants in North India are called ' Settus '. Akin to this is the fact that ' Chetty ' can also be derived from the near-archaic Tamil word *settirai* which is a form of customs duty or import tax, and hence ' Chettis ' derivatively as businessmen and traders.

4. Chetty from Shreshti

The third view is that the term is derived from the Sanskrit word *shreshti*. The root of the Sanskrit term *shresta* means important or superior, and it has even come down to this day as a proper surname as, Mr. Kula-Shreshta (meaning prominent family or one belonging to such a family). Jawaharlal Nehru, writing in a different context, points out, 'The Chettys of Madras have also been leaders in business and banking, especially from ancient times. The word " Chetty " is derived from the Sanskrit "Shreshti", leader of a merchant guild. The common appellation "Seth" is also derived from " Shreshti ". The Madras Chettys have not only played an important part in

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South India, but they have spread out all over Burma, even in the remote villages. "[7] Thus 'Chetty' in the South and 'Seth' (or 'Sethji', a common denominator for rich merchants) in North India are popularly held to be derived from the Sanskrit, 'Shreshta', meaning great or prominent.

While these views may not be devoid of validity, the word might have been actually derived from *sreshti* which in Sanskrit simply means 'merchant'. We come across this term in several Sanskrit classics like *Atharva Samhitha* (I.9.3), *Satapatha Brahamana* (13.7.1.1) and *Aitareya Brahmana* (III. 30.3).

In the Pali literature, the Buddhist *Jataka*[8] tales, composed roughly about the fifth century B.C., we come across not only the term 'Shreshta' but such other terms as 'Setti' (member of a merchant guild), 'Maha-setti' (head of the guild), 'Anu-Setti' (assistant in the guild) and 'Uttara-Setti' (secretary to the guild), etc. The 'Settis' of the period were obviously engaged in trade and commerce and the criteria for the various sub-sects or sub-castes which apparently had already come into existence were possibly wealth, area of residence, or the official position in the trade guilds beginning roughly from the Mauryan period (325 B.C.–188 B.C.) of India's history.

As observed already, today in North India the term 'Sethji' is a common denominator for rich merchants, while in South India particularly in Mysore (the present Karnataka State), a dominant section of the merchant caste or the Vaishya community is called 'Shetty'.

5. Chetty and Chettiar

While the terms 'Chetty' or 'Chetti' are used as caste names at the end of given (proper) names as a mark of membership of a particular caste group, a further suffix 'ar' as an honorific or form of respectability has been added among the Tamil speakers during the last half a century; thus 'Chetty' becomes 'Chettiar'. For example, in the early decades of this century a prominent politician of South India was and is referred to as Sir P. T. Thyagaraya Chetty,

[7]Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (New York: John Day, 1950), p. 351.
[8]*Jataka*, I. 93, 120, 122; II. 319-20, 335; III. 49; IV. 38; V. 384; VI. 348.

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and in recent times a distinguished South Indian politican and the first Minister for Finance in independent India as Sir R. K. Shanmukham Chetty; but today the leader of the Nagarathar community is referred to as Sir M. A. Muthiah Chettiar. (Thus, Mr. Ramaswami *Chetty* becomes Mr. Ramaswami *Chettiar* or simply Mr. *Chettiar*.)

Among the Telugu-speaking sub-caste, the honorific 'garu' (instead of Tamil *ar*) is added as a separate word, and thus 'Chetty garu', etc. However, the sub-caste community is simply referred to as 'Chettiars' as a genus.

Whatever may be the real origin of the word 'Chetty' or 'Chettiars', the present business-cum-banking community is subdivided into numerous sub-castes in Tamil Nadu.[9]

6. Nattukkottai Chettiar

However, the most enterprising, prominent and successful of these business and merchant sub-caste Chettiar groups is the Nattukkottai Chettiars or the Nagarathars.[10] How this particular sub-caste acquired these two names is an interesting indication of and a commentary on their economic milieu. The former (Nattukkottai Chettiar) name must be of relatively recent origin, for it refers to their affluence which dates, in its external manifestation, from the beginning of this century, when their financial operations overseas, particularly in Burma, proved a great success. Those Chettiars who amassed a fortune as a result of their business enterprise in Burma built huge homes, more or less mansions indigenous in style, in their ancestral villages in the Ramnad district of Tamil Nadu. Hence the name *Nattu-Kottai*, for these mansions, which literally mean 'country forts'. Thus *Nattu-Kottai* Chettiars or Chettiars who live in country forts or elegant country homes. It is intersting to note that the affluent Nagarathars, when they made their great fortunes at the turn of the century, did not give up their

[9]The Chettiars are sub-divided into such sub-castes as Arya, Vaisya, Beri, Devanga, Vania, etc.

[10]The Nattukkottai Chettiars are variously called Nagarthars, Nattukkottaiyar, Dhanavanigar, Dhanavaisyar, Nattarasankottai Chettiar, Chetti-Pillaigal, Dhani-desigal, etc.

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ancestral villages, as might have been expected, and migrate to nearby urban areas in Madras, Madurai or Tiruchirapalli to build their mansions, but chose to remain in their traditional moorings.

7. The Nagarathars

The other name Nagarathars,[11] which is shorter, sounds better and which the present writer prefers, can be derived in three ways. *Nagaram* in ancient Tamil usage means a trading post or village. In the Chola period of South Indian history (A.D. 846–A.D. 1279) the term referred to a caste guild devoted to mercantile interests; and therefore *Nagarathars* simply means those who belong to a trading community.

Secondly, the word can also be derived from the Sanskrit root *Nagaraka*[12] or literally a city-dweller, or metaphorically one who is polished and urbane.

Yet another source for deriving the meaning of ' Nagarathar ' is old Tamil literature. Therein *nagar* means palatial or spacious home. Hence Nagarathars mean those who are in the habit of building and living in large and commodious homes.

No matter what the philology and in which meandering way the name came about, we shall use the term *Nagarathars* throughout this study. And by it we mean the *Nattukottai* Chettiars, the Tamil-speaking business community belonging to the Hindu Saivite sub-sect of the Vaishya caste in the State of Tamil Nadu in India.

[11]' The Chettiars are called Nagarthars from the fact that they are grouped for social purposes into nine *Nagarams* or townships. At the head of each of these townships there is one temple . . . . Their population according to the 1921 census was 40,500 and the caste is divided into twenty-five " gotras " for purposes of marriage and adoption.' B. V. N. Naidu, ' The Nattukottai Chettiars and their Banking System ', *Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar Commemoration Volume* (Annamalai University, India 1941), p. 457.

[12]See K. M. Panikkar's Introduction to *Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana* translated by Sir Richard Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot, (ed.) W. G. Archer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963).

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III

THE NAGARATHAR COMMUNITY

Of the various communities in India based on caste, sub-caste, religion, religious sub-sect, language, dialect, regional or cultural groups, the Nagarathars are of unique interest for a variety of reasons to the social scientist.

Their total number, estimated to be about 100,000 is not known exactly. After the 1931 census of India, the question regarding the caste affiliation of citizens was dropped and since then it has been difficult to determine the exact numerical strength of any caste or sub-caste group in India.

But the pattern of their population distribution is fairly well documented because of their business enterprises, which are distributed all over Tamil Nadu (though their homeland is confined to Ramanathapuram and Pudukkottai districts) as well as overseas. While a great majority of India's population is described by successive Census Reports as 'stay-at-home', bound to the homes and villages of the caste-cultural groups in which they are born and where they continue to live, the Nagarathars are one of the few enterprising communities (like the Sikhs and the Sindhis of the North) who have emigrated to such countries as Burma (Burma was a province of India till 1935), Ceylon, Singapore, Malaysia, Indo-China (present-day Vietnam and Cambodia), Indonesia and Mauritius. In these areas the Nagarathars established themselves during the last century and a half as prosperous and successful immigrant business groups.

From a demographic point of view the community is of considerable interest. From some fragmentary and inconclusive evidence, it is found that the Nagarathars are one of the few communities in India not experiencing the current population explosion which the nation's population as a whole has undergone during the last quarter century and more. This hypothesis about the community's low birth rate and consequent average small family size needs to be checked on the basis of a field study enquiring into the fertility pattern of Nagarathar families. The question is whether the small family norm of the Nagarathar is a reality, and, if so, the methods

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by which the community has been able to achieve this end.[13]

Another demographic aspect that requires exploration is the community's sex ratio. While the All-India population has exhibited over successive census decades an adverse sex ratio (930 females per 1000 males for India and 978 females per 1000 males in Tamil Nadu State in 1971) resulting in excessive masculinity and male dominance, this community's sex ratio seems to show a paucity of males and female domination. Indirect evidence on this subject indicates not only considerable anxiety cn the part of many parents for male children but also a high rate of adoption of sons from eligible parents by affluent families with no male children of their own.

Secondly, from the sociological point of view, the community is of considerable interest. As we shall see presently, while no proper history of the Nagarathars based on authentic and reliable data has been written, both legend and tradition aver that the community is an ancient one and that the merchant Kovalan, the hero of the Tamil classic *Silappadikaram* (circa second century A.D.), authored by the Chera Prince Ilango Adigal, belonged to the Nagarathar community. It well might be.

Another feature of a sociological nature may be touched upon here. India, with her numerous religions, all the way from Animism to Zoroastrianism, and her wealth of religious experience both of a conformist and deviant nature, presents a veritable museum for the student of the sociology of religion. This subject, which has received so much attention in such apparently secular states as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Germany, has as yet, for some strange reason, received scant attention in our country.

[13]The reasons behind the apparent low birth rate of the Nagarthar community are not clear. To begin with, the pattern of their traditional occupation from the early times—that is two centuries ago—has been for the adult male members to emigrate to countries of South-East Asia, leaving behind their wives and children, and return to them once in about three years. This forced separation no doubt contributes to their low birth rate.

The second reason may be, according to some geneticists, a function of their in-breeding. Before this factor can be accepted, one has to enquire into the merits of the question whether in-breeding leads to quasi-sterility. The theoretical evidence is not conclusive.

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A socio-cultural indicator of the emotional and religious integration of a traditional religious community is the proportion of the community which opts for an alien and different faith. The lesser the percentage, the greater the integration. Though the Nagarathars and Nadars, for example, have co-existed for centuries in the same geographical area, very few Nagarathars have left Hindu Saivism, while many thousands of Nadars have embraced both Catholic and Protestant denominations of Christianity. The first thing the Nagarathars do on settling in a new area (whether in Tamil Nadu or in a foreign country) is to build a Saivite temple, and the ecology of the temple embraces many cultural, economic and social functions beyond those of a house of individual and communal worship. This is indicative of their intense religious loyalty as well as integration.

As for the community's economic activities, from their ancient occupation of selling and trading in salt, the Nagarathars became small village moneylenders many centuries ago. From simple moneylending to modern banking was a natural and inevitable step. Both in India and certain South-East Asian countries their business ventures proved to be remarkably successful. Their personalised and painstaking methods of banking, their particular system of book-keeping, their law-abiding nature and their philanthropic activities resulting in substantial contributions to a variety of good causes are worthy of detailed chronological documentation and evaluation.[14]

An American observer writing about the Nagarathars in Burma points out: ' The Chettiars are Saivites, and always established a temple in every area where any number of them conducted business. The temple became the centre of the local Chettiar community and often the headquarters of business operations. In Rangoon, the temple's six "apartments" were on the ground floor, and on the second floor was a shrine of Shiva with space in front for meetings of the community to settle current rates and other matters of general importance. The mere physical arrangements of these temples with the idols and the cash boxes stored under the same roof, illust-

[14]A few distinguished Nagarathar philanthropists have apparently understood early in life Andrew Carnegie's maxim that ' surplus wealth is a sacred trust which its possessor is bound to administer to the good of the community '.

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rate most vividly the complete identification of the religious and the economic.

'The first thing demanded of a Chettiar was honesty. According to the *Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report* dishonesty was punished by complete severance from the caste; and all those whose conduct contributed to losses through dishonesty were called upon to make good the amount. This is a built-in insurance, indispensable to the successful operation of the community, for not only does a reputation of honesty enhance the Chettiar prestige with his customers, but the freedom with funds, which was allowed all agents and employees required trustworthiness.'[15]

From ancient times, a percentage of the profits of all Nagarathar firms has been set apart for charity. This custom, called *Mahimai* in Tamil, is akin to that of ancient Jews and certain present-day Christian groups who believe in giving regularly a share of their monthly income—tithing—to the maintenance and support of the church to which they belong and the worthy causes which the church may espouse.

As this feature of *Mahimai* or tithing in India is near unique to this community it needs a little elaboration. In the old days a Nagarathar moneylending firm usually set aside a percentage of profits in the name of the deity or the idol they worshipped as a partner. This was in the nature of an irrevocable gift to the idol. Apart from a portion of the profits that are set aside for charity in the name of the deity, the food prepared everyday in the Nagarathar temple is dedicated to the idol, and after the *puja* (worship ceremony) is over, distributed to the devotees and the poor.[16]

[15]Allene Masters, 'The Chettiars in Burma: An Economic Survey', *Population Review* (Madras), Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1957.

[16]This worthy custom of giving a part of one's earnings to charity, or the particular way this custom was carried out among the Nagarthars overseas, has not been without legal complications, at least in Malaya (now Malaysia).

In Attorney-General v Thirporee Sondree (Thirupurasundari) Justice Ford (1874–1 Ky 377) (apparently moved by an iconoclastic zeal) held that a gift of money to an Idol for the benefit of a temple is void as being an absurdity and not a charity, but that was long before the true nature and status of an Idol in the context of Hindu religion was appreciated in Malaya. The Idol is a legal entity known to the law and has a juridical status with the power of suing and being sued and his shebait is the manager of his estate. This was forcibly pointed

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In the past and until the nineteen-twenties, the Nagarathar philanthropy, apart from helping the needy members of the community, was largely directed to the renovation of ancient Hindu temples in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu and South India, the construction of new Saivite temples in several cities overseas where the community established itself and its business operations, the donation of landed property, the revenue of which was used in perpetuity to defray the expenses involved in maintenance of the temple, its priests and the observance of rituals of daily worship and periodical religious festivals, and the building and maintenance of choultries (religious inns) where visiting Hindu pilgrims were housed and taken care of.

But in recent decades, both before and after the advent of India's freedom, Nagarathar philanthropy has been directed to schools, colleges and universities as well as clinics and hospitals, in keeping with the altered attitudes and changed concepts of social weal and public welfare.

Similarly the occupational composition of the Nagarathar population has significantly changed. Today the community while still preeminently involved in banking and trading, is diversi-, fied and reflects the normal occupational composition of any present-day Indian or Asian population group.

Apart from such conventional professions as medicine, engineering, law and teaching, the community is involved in a wide spectrum of business and commercial operations including the manufacture of a variety of modern industrial goods, textile mills, cement and rayon factories, construction operations, export and import businesses.

out by Lord Shaw in the Privy Council in *Pramitha Nath Mullick v. Pradyumna Kumar Mullick* (1925–52 IA 245). His Lordship observed, ' One of the questions emerging at this point, is as to the nature of such an idol, and the services due thereto. A Hindu Idol is, according to long established authority, founded upon the religious customs of the Hindus, and the recognition thereof by Courts of Law, a juristic entity. It has a juridical status with the power of suing and being sued. Its interests are attended to by the person who has the deity in his charge and who is in law its manager with all the powers which would, in such circumstances, on analogy, be given to the manager of the estate of an infant heir. See S. K. D., ' Nattukkottai Chettiars in Malaya', *The Malayan Law Journal*, February 1958.

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The community on the whole has made good its business and cultural heritage in becoming a relatively affluent group in the nation's economy, and its philanthropic contribution to the State and the people in general (and not just to the Nagarathar community alone) is considerably larger than its population numbers would warrant. If a careful accounting is rendered of all their benefactions, large and small, in India and elsewhere over the last century, the total may well run into many millions of rupees. In this, they are not unlike the Parsees, the Marwaris, and the American and European Jews, noted through the centuries for their small numbers and large benefactions.

IV

NAGARATHARS IN LEGEND AND HISTORY

1. Sources of Data

The history of the genesis, growth and dispersal of the Nagarathar community is lost in the mists of legendary antiquity.

Normally, the general sources for the history of any community or region in India can be roughly grouped under the following headings: (1) literary sources (written accounts by the natives, visitors and travellers, in terms of books, manuscripts, diaries, letters, etc.; (2) inscriptions in temples, monuments or other public places and other epigraphic material; (3) numismatic evidence; (4) grants and deeds (given by princes, rulers or community leaders for the distinguished performance of various duties by prominent citizens, expressed in palm leaf notations or copper plate announcements); and other categories.

There are, however, no reliable historical sources to provide material for even a brief authentic history of the Nagarathar community, except for two slender sources of an epigraphical nature often cited by writers on this subject: the *Velangudi* inscription and the *Pattayams* (palm leaf manuscripts) of Palani temple.

2. The Velangudi Inscription

The Velangudi inscription refers to a twelfth-century Tamil inscription in a Saivite temple in the Velangudi village, Tirupattur

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taluk of Ramanathapuram district. This inscription is generally known as Poonkonrai Velankudi; it is also sometimes referred to as Kundakkādu Velankudi. While earlier writers on the subject of Nagarathar history have contended that this inscription is an authentic and major source of Nagarathar history, they have maintained in the same breath that there is no trace whatsoever of the actual inscription, nor a photostat or any other reliable copy of it, and that attempts to locate the actual inscription have failed.

At the end of the last century, however, a South Indian writer, Sadhavadanam Subramaniya Ayyar, about whom little is known, brought out a Tamil book entitled *Thanavaisyar ākiya Nattukottai Nagarathar Sarithram* (Thanjavur: Desabimani Press, 1894).

This book is believed to have been based on a manuscript kept in the Mutt of Tulavur (which is a small village situated near Kunnakkudi of Ramanathapuram district). This manuscript, in its turn, is alleged to be based on the Velangudi inscription.

Material in this book by Subramania Ayyar on the history and part cularly the various historical migrations of the Nagarathars, supposedly based on the Velangudi inscription, has found its way into numerous subsequent Tamil publications.[17] And the various dates, periods and incidents mentioned therein have been taken seriously enough by a few modern scholars for them to dilate upon the ancient history of the community, the rise and fall of its fortunes and its periodical mass migrations from one region to another in Tamil Nadu.

The so-called history given in Ayyar's book begins from 2898 B.C. and ends in A.D. 1565. Three migrations are referred to in the book. The first two movements were from Naga Nadu to Tondaimandalam, and from Tondaimandalam to Chola Nadu. And the third and last was from Chola Nadu to Pandia Nadu.

[17]These are: Chockalinga Ayyah, *Nattukkottai Nagarathar enum Magudatana Vaisyarin Marabu Vilakkam* (Karaikudi: Periyannan Chettiar, 1919).

A. Ramanathan Chettiar, *Nattukkottai Nagarathar Varalaru* (Madras: Commercial Printing and Publishing House, 1953).

A. Seshadri Sharma, *Nattukkottai Nagarathar Varalaru* (Madras: Vanadhi Publishing House, 1970).

CT. Natarajan, *Nattukkottai Nagarathar Varalaru* (Nachandupatti: Somu, 1973)

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This 'history' is full of fascinating details with dates in Salivahana[18] and Kali[19] eras.

All this was supposed to be based on the important Velangudi inscription — according to Ayyar the only major source of information on Nagarathar history available thus far. But the few South Indian historical scholars working on this minute bit of history from 1894 onwards apparently did not find the actual Velangudi inscription.

Fortunately, the present writer was able to locate the inscription and obtain a photostat copy of it, thanks to the Epigraphist of Dravidian Inscriptions of the Archaeological Survey of the Government of India, Mysore Circle. This twelfth-century Tamil inscription, and an English translation of it, are reproduced elsewhere in this book. We presume it is the true Velangudi inscription, and there seems to be no reason to doubt it. The inscription does not give any historical material on the evolution and migration of the Nagarathar community at all. It simply mentions the gifts given by the Vanipa Nagarathars of Velangudi to the God of the temple at Velangudi, and nothing more!

Therefore, all that has been written on the Nagarathar history based on this spurious source during the last nearly a century, must be taken merely as a community legend. In a word, to the knowledge of the present writer, there is no acceptable, reliable evidence on which to construct even a skeletal scholarly history of the community.

TRANSLATION OF THE INSCRIPTION No. 507 OF 1958–59 FROM VELANGUDI (D) TIRUPPATTUR TALUK, RAMANATHAPURAM DISTRICT

Hail! prosperity! In the fifth year opposite the first year of *Sadaiyavarman* alias *Tribhuvana Chakkaravarthikal Vikrama Pandya Dēvar,*[20] we, the *Vāṇiya Nagarathar*[21] of Vēlaṅguḍi in *Poonkuṇra*

[18]Salivahana Era commences from A.D. 78.

[19]Kali or Kaliyuga era is reckoned as beginning from 3102 B.C.

[20]Sadaiyavarman Vikrama Pandya was a ruler of Pandya country (Southern Tamil Nadu)—thirteenth century.

[21]Nagarathars of Merchant Community.

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Nādu,[22] have assigned to the God (Nāyanār) the following taxes: We caused the aforesaid rights to be incised on the temple wall. They are as follows: *Pāḍi Kāval*[23] tax levied on the people (Ūrār) — two old *Kāsus*[24] per year, tax on pepper —.. kāsus per one bundle (Pothi), two and half kāsus per one bundle of arecanuts, two and half kāsus per a bundle of sesame, one and one by eighth kāsus per a bundle of paddy, two and half kāsus per a bundle of rice, two and half kāsus per one bundle of cotton and one and one by eighth kasus per a bundle of salt; Thus agreed the officers and the Ūrār of Vēlaṅguḍi. Further we, the *Vāniyar* (of Vēlaṅguḍi) agree to give one piece of oil cake (to the temple).

3. Pattayams

The second source usually cited is the Records of Palani Temple or the *Pattyams* of Palani. Palani is a small town near Dindugal in Madurai district. The town has a temple on a hill dedicated to the Saivite God Thandayuthapani. These *Pattayams* are palm leaf manuscript records in Tamil. Dr. V.SP. Manickam, former Professor of Tamil at Annamalai University, has edited the eight Palani *Pattayams.*[25]

The names of these eight Palani records and their approximate dates are given below:

1. *Nirampa Aalakiya Desikar Pattayam* — A.D. 1627
2. Palani Temple current table — A.D. 1670
3. Seven Nagarathar *Dharmasasanams* — A.D. 1680
4. Seven Nagarathar *Dharmasasanams* — A.D. 1766
5. Seven Nagarathar *Dharmasasanams* — A.D. 1788
6. *Pranmalai Adeenam Current Table* — A.D. 1800
7. *Adeenam Pattabisheka Table* — A.D. 1802
8. *Madalaya Dharmasasanam* — A.D. 1805

[22]Area around Mahibalanpatti, Tiruppattur taluk, Ramanathapuram district.

[23]System of watch in a village.

[24]An ancient gold coin=28 gr. troy.

[25]V. SP. Manickam (ed.), *Nagarathar Arappattayankal* (Nerkuppai: Annathana Madam, 1961).

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Velangudi Inscription

1 ஸ்வஸ்தி ஸ்ரீ [ரீ] கோச்சடையபன்மரான திரிபுவனசக்க[ர]வத்
வ து

2 திகள் ஸ்ரீ விக்(கி) ரம பாண்டிய தேவற்கு யாண்டு ரு ஆவது
[மா[சி]மு]

3 பூங்குன்ற நாட்டு வேலங்குடி வாணிய நகரத்தோம் எங்கள்
தே–

4 ருவில் பாடிகாவல் நாயநாற்கு குடுத்தோம் ந[க]ரத்தோம்
சவத்தி

5 ஊடர் பகல் வாணிய நகரத்தோம் கல்வெட்டி
குடுத்தோம் உடர்

6 ஆண்டொன்றுக்கு இறக்கும் பழங்காசு இரண்டும்
பெரு மிளகு கெ

7 பாதிக்கு காசு .. ம் பாக்கு பொதி ஒன்றுக்கு காசு உழிம்
என் பொதி க

8 க்கு கா[சு] உழி ம் நெற்பொதிக்கு காசு கழும்
அரிசி பொதிக்கு காசு உழி ம் பரிந்தி பொ–

9 திக்கு காசு உழி ம் உப்பு பொ[தி]க்கு காசு கழு ம்
இப்படிக்கு வெலங்குடி முதலி–

10 களும் ஊரும் அமைஞ்சு சொல்ல இப்படி செய்து
குடுத்தோம் இவ்வூ ர் வா–

11 ணியரோம் ??? பிழைவால் ஒருகட்டி பின்னுக்கும்
குடுப்பொமா

12 கவும் ??? — ~

In characters of about the twelfth century.

[*] indicates letters supplied where they are not engraved.

[ ]—not clear.

. – letter not decipherable or broken.

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These Palani *Pattayams* are written in colloquial Tamil. They mention the original and traditional salt business (*Uppu Vaniham*) of the Nagarathar community, their contributions to the Palani Temple and their other religious activities in connection with this temple during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this period this region was ruled by the Telugu Nayak Kings of Madurai, and the Sivaganga part of the Nayak Kingdom was under the tutelage of the Maruthu Pandya brothers who ruled the tiny Sivaganga State in Ramanathapuram district between A.D. 1780 and 1801.

There are a few noteworthy points in these records. In the second *sasana* or *sasanam* (a deed or a declaration on a palm leaf or copper plate) we come across for the first time the term *pulli* denoting a married couple (' dot ' in Tamil)[26] and *pullikasu* (money for each dot). It says that every Nagarathar *pulli* should give some amount, mutually agreed upon between the temple authorities and the Nagarathar, for the maintenance of the Palani Temple and for the regular performance of certain religious functions. In other *sasanas* also these terms are used in connection with the collection of contributions for this purpose. Here the term *pulli* is considered equivalent to *kudi* (family). From these records we come to know that the term *pulli* came into use among the Nagarathars and their temple records from about A.D. 1670

Another term, *vellatti* (wife), occurs a few times in these records. In one of the Nagarathar legends (to be narrated shortly) there is the story of Nagarathar men marrying *Vellala* girls. The Nagarathars are generally considered to belong to the traditional third caste (*Vaisyas*) of merchants and traders. And the *Vellalas* belong to a sub-group of the fourth caste of agriculturists. This is, of course, intercaste marriage. According to the evidence available in the *sasanas*, the term *Vellatti* clearly means wife.[27] The wife of

[26]Later in this essay we shall deal with the practice and importance of entering a married couple as a dot (*pulli*) in the temple records.

[27]The term *Vellatti* occurs in *Isaikudimanam*, a marriage agreement prevalent even now in the Nagarathar community; and a line in the marriage agreement says ' Vellattikku panam muppadu ' which means thirty panams (silver coins) to Vellatti.

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a man named Kumarappan in the records is called *Vellatti Cittal*. The term *Acchi*, used in the present day for a Nagarathar housewife, had not yet come into vogue.[28]

In the above mentioned *sasanas* we come across for the first time in the literature available to us the somewhat peculiar way in which the traditional Nagarathars write their names. We find such names as Murugappa Chetty Veerappan and Arunachalam Chetty Ramanathan. These mean Veerappan, son of Murugappa Chetty, and Ramanathan, son of Arunachalam Chetty respectively. Even in the *moy* (customary cash presented by invitees to social functions) accounts written during the time of marriage, the names of bridegrooms are referred to as above. It is apparently not customary to say Murugappa Chetty's son (*magan*) Veerappan but simply Murugappa Chetty Veerappan. This practice continues to a large extent to this day in all agreements, legal and otherwise.

The contribution of the Nagarathar community to the growth of Tamil language and literature is attested to in one of the *sasanas*. There are references to the Nagarathar's love for poet Tiruvalluvar's (circa first century A.D.) famous book *Tirukkural* and the saint Thirumular's (circa fifth century A.D.) Saivite work *Tirumantiramālai*. The *sasanas* also bear evidence to the rich patronage extended by the Nagarathar community to Tamil poets and writers in general. For example, a golden anklet was bestowed upon *Avvai*, the celebrated Tamil poetess; the community also constructed a temple in memory of Kamban, the renowned author of the Tamil *Ramayana*.

As for legends tracing the history of the community from the earliest times, there is no dearth whatsoever. If a community's legends may be taken to reflect some kernel of historical truth (no matter how distorted and embellished) from generation to generation, we have then some rough outline of the genesis, growth, internal migration and diaspora of the community through the last two centuries.

[28]One writer, Mr. Saw Ganesan, however, believes that *Vellatti* means a maidservant. He probably finds it difficult to reconcile such intercaste marriages two centuries ago or even earlier.

Saw Ganesan, *Pillaiyarpatti Talavaralaru* (in Tamil) (Pillayarpatti: P. K. Nagaramaniyam, 1955) p. 59.

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4. Two Tamil Epics

The major literary sources; *Silappadikaram* and *Manimegalai*, the two earliest Tamil epics, believed to have been composed in the second and sixth centuries A.D. respectively, throw some light on the Nagarathars in general and their socio-economic activities of the period in particular.

As for the epic *Silappadikaram*, it is considered important for its hero and heroine, Kovalan and Kannagi, belong to the Vaisya caste and the Nagarathar (or Nattukkottai Chettiar) sub-community. There is some internal circumstantial evidence based on the traditional mores of the community which lend a certain amount of credence to this belief.

The interesting story of *Silappadikaram* may be briefly told for the benefit of the non-Tamilian reader.

Kovalan and his wife Kannagi are a happy couple of the affluent merchant community. They live in comfort in the city of Kaveri-poom-pattinam,[29] the flourishing capital port of the Chola Kingdom in circa second century A.D.

One day Kovalan happens to meet the beautiful dancer Madhavi, and loses his heart over her charms. He becomes involved with her to the extent of almost entirely forgetting his wife Kannagi. In course of time he deserts Kannagi and leaves with Madhavi. After a few years, during the *Indra Vizha* festival celebrations he unjustly suspects Madhavi's fidelity, forsakes her, and returns to Kannagi, who has been faithfully awaiting the return of her errant husband.

After a happy reunion, both Kovalan and Kannagi come to Madurai, the then capital of the Pandya Kingdom, to start their lives afresh. Kovalan sets out to sell one of Kannagi's anklets. It so happens that at that time the Queen of the Kingdom had lost one of *her* anklets, and the servants of the court had been searching in the city for the lost royal ornament. Kovalan is caught while trying to sell his wife's anklet, and a false charge is foisted on him

[29] Kaveri-poom-pattinam (the Khaberis of Ptolemy) is now a village in Sirkali taluk of Tanjore district where the river Kaveri (Cauvery) enters the sea. In earlier Tamil literature the village is also called Poompuhar, sometimes abbreviated as Puhar.

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as the thief responsible for the Queen's missing anklet. Without enquiring into the question of his innocence or guilt, the Pandyan King orders Kovalan's summary execution.

On hearing this shocking news, Kannagi rushes to the Pandyan Court and proves her husband's innocence by producing her other matching anklet. The King, shocked by the weight of his inordinate injustice, collapses and dies on the spot. So does the Queen. But the death of the royal couple does not assuage Kannagi's anguish over her husband's tragic end. With a supernatural wrath and power born of her righteousness and chastity, she casts a curse on the city of Madurai and reduces it almost to ashes. Thus the death of her innocent husband has been avenged.

And true to all Hindu epics, there is a happy ending. The Goddess of Madurai, the presiding deity of the city, appears before Kannagi and pacifies her. Kannagi, calmed and consoled, ascends the western hills where her husband awaits her in a heavenly vehicle. The wife and husband, thus miraculously reunited, depart for happy regions unknown.

Certain references to the habits and manners of Kovalan and Kannagi are reminiscent of the Nagarathars of the present day. Even certain Tamil terms used then by the poet Prince Ilango Adigal, the author of *Silappadikaram*, are apparently in current colloquial usage by the Nagarathars. Thus Kovalan and Kannagi might well have belonged to the trading community which we have now come to call the Nagarathars.

Some believe that the present-day Nagarathars are descended from the Vaisya community referred to in the *Silappadikaram*. The word ' Chetty ' appears for the first time in the epic. Certain customs like blowing a conch on all ceremonial occasions (it is, however, possible that this custom was practised earlier by certain other Hindu communities), taking the *tali* (the chain with which the bridegroom solemnises his marriage with the bride), in procession before tying it round the neck of the bride, the arrangement for a married son to have a separate establishment in the same house, etc., are also cited as evidence to prove that the Nagarathars are at least as old as the epic.

We learn from the *Manimegalai*, another Tamil epic, that a rich merchant named Chandradattan, possibly a forefather of the

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Nattukkottai Chettiars, sailed from India to Malaya and other South-East Asian countries in his own sailing boat, in the period which may be reckoned roughly to have been some time during the beginning of the Christian era. The Nagarathars apparently practised the oft-quoted Tamil saying *thirai kadalōdium thiraviyam thēdu* meaning that one must acquire wealth, going even beyond the high seas to do so.

Tamil literature of the period refers to the Chettiars' flourishing trade — including overseas trade — in cotton textiles, pearls, spices and silk.

Writing about the social life of the Tamils during the Sangam period (circa fifth century A.D.), Dr Subrahmanian points out:

'It seems from a note in the *Nachchinarkiniyam*[30] that 'trade' is common to *Vaisyas* and to *Vellalas*. It appears that (1) learning, (2) performing sacrifices, (3) making gifts, (4) agriculture, (5) protection of cows and (6) trade were the prescribed duties of a *Vaisya*, while, (1) learning, other than the Vedas, (2) making gifts, (3) agriculture, (4) protection of cows, (5) trade and (6) worship are the prescribed functions of a *Vellala*. But another list says that worship must be substituted by performing sacrifices for, in as much as they enjoyed *jus connubium* with royal families, they could also perform such sacrifices as the kings performed. But it seems that considerable confusion existed between the *Vaisyas* and the *Vellalas* and they were known mostly by the profession they, for the time being, pursued. The merchants and the traders largely belonged to the cities; Puhar was a most famous place for the great *Vaisya* families to which Kannagi and Kovalan belonged. The name *Chetti* denoting a commercial community of South India seems to have been known in the *Sangam* age also. We come across a merchant called *Arattan Chetty*[31] in the *Silappadikaram*; the *Manimegalai* speaks of 'Chandradattan' a merchant as a *chetti*[32] and mentions nine other *chettis* in another context.[33] These *chettis*

[30] *Nachchinarkiniyam* is a commentary on *Tholkappiyam*, the earliest extent Tamil Grammar and the former was written by the famous commentator Nachchinarkiniyar of the fourteenth century A.D.

[31] *Silappadikaram*, XXIII: 129.

[32] *Manimegalai*, XVI: 107.

[33] *Manimegalai*, XXV: 165.

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were merchants. They were the richest community in the land; among them were the richest persons in the capital city with the possible exception of the kings. The suburb of the city in which they lived was 'like the very house of the goddess of wealth.'

'The foreign trade which is known to have been very extensive in the *Sangam* age was managed by the *Vaisyas*. While the fishermen owned the small fishing boats, the big merchants owned the bigger ocean-going vessels. They lived in luxurious houses and led a high life'.[34]

Another literary source for some fragmentary information about the Nagarathars is Sekkilar's[35] *Periyapuranam*, an epic of the twelth century which narrates the biographies of some sixty-three Saivite saints who flourished in Tamil Nadu between the third and the sixth centuries. A few of these saints are Nagarathars, notably Pattinathar[36] who is believed to have flourished in Chettinad around the ninth century.

5. A Modern Literary Source

A more modern literary source is found in the poetical works of Pāduvār Muthappa Chettiar of Kilasivalpatti village. He lived in the earlier part of the nineteenth century and his writings, particularly the book *Thirumuga Vilasam*,[37] throw some light not

[34]N. Subrahmanian, *Sangam Polity: The Administration and Social Life of the Sangam Tamils* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966) pp. 279-280.

[35]Seikkilar was a Prime Minister of a Chola King and a famous Saivite poet, during the twelfth century.

P. Ramanathan Pillai and S. A. Ramaswamy (eds.), *Tiruththondar Maakkathai* (*Periyapuranam*) (Madras: The South-India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, 1970).

[36]It is evident from the history of Tamil literature that there have been two poets of the name, Pattinathar, the first, an erudite Saivite sage of ninth or tenth century and the second a *Siddha* or mystic of seventeenth or eighteenth century. The first one wrote five poems in about 210 verses, running to about 2,000 lines, gathered into the eleventh Book of the Saiva canon. The second one also composed mostly occasional verses running about 2,000 lines which are grouped under the name *Pattinathar Padal Thirattu* (Collection of Pattinathar's Verses).

[37]Pāduvār Muthappa Chettiar, *Jayakondar Sadagamum Tirumuga Vilasamum Nattukkottai Nagarathar Sarithramum* (Madras: Saiva Siddhanta Noorppathippu Kazhagam, 1941).

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only on the recent history of the community but also on their social and religious beliefs and practices.

Several legends speak of the Nagarathar community's migration *en masse* from one kingdom to another in the Tamil country until about the seventeenth century when they settled down in what is now Chettinad.

The Nagarathars' original home is believed to be either Kanchipuram or Kaveri-poom-pattinam. From Kanchipuram, as a resuit of heavy and unjust fines and punishments imposed upon them (the reasons for such unjust treatment are not clear), the Chettiars moved to the Chola country. According to one story, Manunidhi Cholan, a righteous ruler of the Chola country of the day, enquired of the Chettiars the reasons behind their sudden mass 'immigration' into his realm. On hearing of their past affluent history and their current tale of woe in Kanchipuram, the King was kind enough to permit them to settle in his kingdom. He then bestowed certain royal honours on them. He is believed to have told them, 'We regard you as *Pradhana Vaisyas* [important traders] and you will be given the rare honour of placing the crown on the head of the prince who succeeds to the throne. As such you will be called *Makuda Vaisyas* (*Makuda* means a crown).'

The King allotted them enviable residential quarters in the east, west and south streets of the capital Kaveri-poom-pattinam. Apparently the north street of the capital was reserved for ordinary Vaisyas. The Nagarathars were given a lion flag or standard and were permitted to display golden *stupi* (*kalasam* or golden vessel) on their homes and to receive religious orders from Isanya Sivachariar of Chidambaram.

Thus some eight thousand families settled in the capital. They developed a flourishing trade and served the King with unswerving loyalty. In course of time they earned even a higher title, for they came to be called *Rathina-dana-makuta Vaisyas* (meaning Vaisyas or merchants dealing in precious stones, possessing considerable wealth and acting as crown-bearers of the Chola Princes).

Such royal hospitality did not go unreciprocated. The Nagarathars were not only loyal and law-abiding citizens but became noted for their piety and philanthropy. They continued their worship of Vinayaka or Ganesha, the god that gives success,

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followed the path of Saivism, built temples and tanks and sank public wells.

A century or so later, an irretrievable tragedy overtook the Vaisyas. The traditional accounts of what happened vary, but the popular version is that King Poovanti Cholan made advances to a young Vaisya woman and when she refused him, he imprisoned all the Vaisya women. It is not clear whether the King had all the women he had imprisoned murdered, or whether he freed them, and the Vaisya males, on a question of honour, put an end to their women. After this incredible catastrophe the Vaisya men gave up their lives in a mass suicide. Only the young Vaisya boys escaped this mass destruction.

As the years passed and the wicked Poovanti Cholan became old, he wished to celebrate the coronation of his son, Rajabhushana Cholan. He had, however, not forgotten that according to the existing custom a chosen leader of the Vaisyas had to crown his son. The Vaisya lads, who were being brought up by a religious leader, came to the King and said, 'Oh King! Thanks to your unrighteousness all our elders gave up their lives in honour of their women. We have no parents. There are no women in our community. Are we, young unmarried men, entitled to crown your heir apparent?'

Thereupon the King consulted various elders and gurus at his Court and found that the Vaisyas could marry the young women of the Vellala community. After prolonged consultations and negotiations with the leaders of the Vellala community, it was agreed that Vellala young women would marry the Vaisya young men. But the young Vaisya men, while willing to marry Vellala girls, were emphatic that they would not give their future daughters in marriage to Vellala men. This was the old Hindu problem of the merits of *anuloma* versus *pratiloma* marriages.[38] After some

[38]*Anuloma* marriage is one in which the groom belongs to a higher caste than that of the bride. *Pratiloma* marriage is one in which the groom belongs to a lower caste than that of the bride.

The *Pratiloma* (*prati-loma* or 'counter-hair' or marriage 'against the grain') or a hypogamous marriage is regarded as contrary to the prescribed order. The *anu-loma* ('with the hair') or hypergamous marriage though not encouraged was widely practised.

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protest the Vellala young men agreed to this. Under royal patronage mass marriages were performed between Vaisya men and Vellala girls. After this matrimonial alliance the Chettiar community gained new names. They came to be called *Upayakula Poopala Vaisyas*, *Rathina-dana-makuta Poopala Vaisyas*, *Chandra Gangakula Vaisyas*, etc.[39]

There was one more move, and this was the last migration of the Chettiars within the Tamil country before they finally settled down in what is now Chettinad in Tamil Nadu. This internal migration from Chola Nadu to Pandya Nadu came about this way. Soundara Pandiyan, King of the Pandya country, approached Prince Rajabhushana Cholan and said, 'My fellow King: Our country was submerged for some time due to an unprecedented deluge. As a result, my land, people and cattle suffered much. Some people perished and many emigrated. But now the country is returning to normalcy and prosperity is round the corner. Kindly give us some good citizens and Vaisya merchants to settle in our land.' Finding the plea a reasonable one, the Chola King persuaded some Vaisya merchants to migrate to the neighbouring kingdom. The Vaisyas were willing but pointed out to the King that 'there was no point in some of us being here and some of us being there. We would like to stay united wherever we are.' Thereupon the Chola King permitted them to go to Pandya Nadu *en masse*.

As promised, King Soundara Pandyan allotted the new Vaisya immigrants some well-defined territory in his land, west of the sea, north of the river Vaigai, east of the mountain Piran-malai and south of the river Vellaru. It was here that they built their first

[39]According to another version of this legend, once when the river Cauvery was in flood and threatened to overflow the capital of the Chola Kingdom, King Poovanthi Cholan, who was the ruler at the time, proclaimed that all adult citizens should help dam the river's bank and prevent flooding of the city. The members of the Nattukkottai Chettiar community, having grown proud and conceited on account of their wealth and status, slighted the royal proclamation demanding manual labour from all men and women. The King was enraged at the Chettiar's behaviour and as a result they lost his favour. In course of time, the community was subjected to endless humiliations. The King confiscated their property. Abduction of their women and massacre of the men followed. This tragedy left behind only the Chettiar children, who were taken by some kind neighbours to the nearby Pandyan Kingdom, where they were brought up.

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community centre called Ilayatrakudi Nagaram and the people who settled in this central *Nagaram* or township came to be called Nagarathars. Then they built the first temple, to be followed in course of time by eight others.

The legendary history narrated so far has been briefly summarised in essentially the same form by the British Gazetteer author, Edgar Thurston more than half a century ago:

'Oppressed by a certain ruler, the Vaisyas of lunar race living in the town of Santhyapuri emigrated in a body to Kancheepuram in the Tondamandalam country in the year 204 of the *Kaliyuga*. The King of Kancheepuram gave them permission to settle in his country and made grants of lands, temples and *Madams* [religious establishments] to them. They stayed there for a very long time, but being troubled by heavy taxes and fines, they left that part of the country about 2312 *Kaliyuga* and settled in the Chola country. The Chola King being much impressed with them, bestowed on them the privilege of placing the crown on the head of a new ruler at the time of coronation. In those days, the town of Kaveri-poompattinam is said to have been in a flourishing state, and in it the north street was occupied by Vaisyas from other countries. Being unwilling to disturb them, the King made the new settlers occupy the east, west and south streets. As a mark of respect they were allowed to use flags with the figure of a lion on them and use golden vessels (*kalasam*) in their houses. They all at the instance of the King, became disciples of the Isanya Sivachariyar of Pathanjalikshetra (Chidambaram).

'About 3775 *Kaliyuga* Puvanthi Chola Raja imprisoned several of the Vaisya women, whereon all the eight thousand Vaisya families destroyed themselves leaving their male children to be taken care of by a religious teacher named Admanadhachariar. In all 1,502 children were thus brought up. Later on Poovanthi Chola fell ill, and knowing his recovery to be impossible, sent for the Vaisya boys and asked them to attend to the coronation of his son, Rajabhushana Chola. But they said that as they were bachelors they could not comply with his request. The King made them marry Vellala girls. Those of the west street took as wives girls of the Karkathar section; those of the east street, girls of Sozhia section; and those of the south street, girls of the Kaniyala section.

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The three groups became disciples of three different *Madams* [religious establishments] namely, those at Tiruvarur, Kumbakonam and Vanchium [towns]. Later, a Pandya King named Sundara Pandya is said to have asked the Chola King to induce some of the Vaisyas to settle down in the Pandya territory. They accordingly once more emigrated in a body and reached the village of Onkarakudi on a Friday. They were allowed to settle in the tract of the country north of the river Vaigai, east of the Piranmalai and south of the Vellar [river].'[40]

The present area of Chettinad thus formed part of the Pandya Kingdom until the advent of the Nayak rulers of Madurai, who held sway over the territory during the sixteenth century. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Raghunatha Sethupathi (1674–1710), the ruler of Ramnad, defeated the Nayak army of Princess Mangammal in 1702 and secured complete freedom for his little kingdom. Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were periodical incursions by Muslim chieftains, both from the north and the south, as well as petty feuds between Ramanathapuram and Sivaganga principalities. The consequent insecurity as well as the growth of the Chettiar population led to their gradual dispersal into nearby villages and thus the ninety-six villages of the Nagarathar community came into existence .

By 1800 the British had established their rule in South India, created the Madras Presidency and restored relatively peaceful conditions. The Nagarathars then moved closer to the centre of their settlement from the relatively far-off villages, and the Nagarathar villages shrank from the original ninety-six to the present seventy-eight.

V

THE NAGARATHARS' NINE TEMPLES AND THE PULLI SYSTEM OF MARRIAGE (AND POPULATION) REGISTRATION

A major and distinctive socio-religious characteristic of the Nagarathar community is their life-long association with one of

[40] Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), Vol. V, p. 158.

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their nine ancestral temples in Chettinad. The temples play a prominent role in Nagarathar life. A popular Nagarathar saying through the centuries has been, 'Do not live in a place where there is no temple.' (*Koil illa ōōril kudi irukka vendam.*) The Nagarathars are classified or categorised on the basis of their allegiance to a particular temple circle, for every Nagarathar by birth is a member of a temple circle through patrilineal descent, and the members of each temple circle are therefore agnates. That is, all members of temple circle are descendants of a common ancestor.

1. The Social Ecology of the Temple

Each of the nine 'clans' or sub-divisions of the Nagarathars own one of these temples which serves as a central meeting place for matters spiritual and temporal affecting the community.

Each of these temples represents the final authority in all religious and social matters for each of the nine clans. The administration of these matters is vested in a standing committee for each temple which is elected annually. They decide such questions as are referred to them. For example, they may arbitrate the partition of an estate between the sons and daughters of a member of the estate who died intestate. Perhaps the most important task of these temple authorities is to arrange marriages between members of the different temple clans, for members of the same temple cannot marry. And members of all the nine temple groups meet annually at some central place to discuss matters of common interest.

These nine temples are Ilayathangudi, Mathur, Vairavanpatti, Nemam, Iluppakudi, Suraikudi, Velangudi, Pillaiyarpatti and Iraniyur.[41] They are located in and around the villages of Chettinad. The first three are the big temples and have seven, seven and three sub-divisions or sub-circles respectively, totalling seventeen sub-circles. The remaining six temples are single temple circles devoid of any sub-circles. Thus there are twenty-three sub-circles in all.

[41]The names of the temples are not the same as the names of the villages in which they are located except for two temples which are Ilayathangudi and Pillaiyarpatti.

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The following table presents the approximate year the temple was either built or taken over by the Nagarathars and the population numbers (married persons only) as shown in the registers of these temples in 1949–50. These figures were given by the respective temple authorities.

TABLE 3

Temple and clan name, the approximate year the temple was taken and the total population (married persons only) registered in the temple.

No.	Temple and clan name	Year taken over in A.D.	Population (Married persons only) 1949–50
1.	Ilayathangudi	707	5,994
2.	Mathur	712	7,134
3.	Vairavanpatti	712	5,484
4.	Nemam	714	1,504
5.	Iluppakudi	714	2,900
6.	Suraikudi	718	1,286
7.	Velangudi	718	44
8.	Pillaiyarpatti	714	3,428
9.	Iraniyur	714	2,578

Source: Temple authorities. The latest figures for 1973 supplied by the temple authorities appear to be too low and improbable and hence not used here.

All the Nagarathars are attached to one or another of these sub-circles which are equated with a *gotra* (sept)[42] for purposes of marriage and adoption. Marriage within the same gotra is prohibited. That is, a Nagarathar male belonging to a particular temple sub-circle cannot marry a girl from his own sub-circle; his bride must come from another temple sub-circle. But a Naga-

[42]*Gotra* has come to mean, originally among the Hindu Brahmins, and now among all caste groups, an exogamous *sept* descended in an unbroken male line from a single male ancestor. Today many consider this concept mythical, for no one knows or can possibly remember the original male ancestor.

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rathar can adopt someone (confined usually to male children or unmarried young men) only from his own temple sub-circle.

All the members belonging to the same temple circle are called *perum-pangālis* (major paternal kinsmen), while the members of a temple sub-circle are called *pangālis* (paternal kinsmen). As already pointed out, marriages among the *pangālis* is prohibited, whereas adoption is confined to the *pangālis*.

It is believed that the Nagarathars started with one temple about A.D. 700 at Ilayathankudi, alias, Kulasekarapuram in what was known as Kalavasalnadu, a sub-division of Keraiasingavala-nadu. And as the Nagarathars grew in numbers and spread to other villages in Chettinad, eight more temples came into existence, making nine in all, as mentioned earlier.

Apart from the nine major temples (to which all Nagarathars must belong) in Tiruppattur taluk of Ramanathapuram district, there are other small temples located in various Chettinad villages built by the Nagarathars. Both the large and small temples are dedicated to Shiva.

Besides these, there are two other kinds of temples. First, there are temples constructed in other parts of Tamil Nadu and India which are also dedicated to Shiva. These temples have certain Nagarathar endowments in land and money to defray the costs of daily worship, periodical festivals, and general upkeep of the structures. The other kind of temples are those built by Nagarathars abroad in places where they have permanently settled. These are dedicated to God Thandayuthapani or Lord Subramania. These temples can be found in such far-off places as Rangoon, Colombo, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Saigon, Jakarta, etc.

The role of the temple in the Nagarathar community is a unique one. The primary purpose of a temple is to provide a place of worship, both individual and communal. The life of an average Nagarathar, even in the present day, is largely temple-centred. A Nagarathar does not begin any new activity, social or economic, without first offering worship at the temple. The religiosity of the average Nagarathar is almost proverbial.

But to the Nagarathar the temple is more than a place of worship. Each temple has a Council of Elders, and this Council or Committee of Elders nominates one or more Karyakarars (literally 'doers')

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who are in charge of the day-to-day management of the temple. In addition to the *Karyakaras* who act as *Panchayatdars* (familiar in India's rural self-governing institutions) each temple has an assistant called *Vairavi* and an attender called *Thandalkaran* whose primary duty is to collect a kind of tax from the members of the temple for its maintenance.

As pointed out earlier, this Council also sometimes acts as a court of justice of sorts. It discusses and settles various matters pertaining to the overall welfare of the Nagarathar community. These issues may range from marriage contracts, monetary disputes and cases of indebtedness to deviations from the accepted norms in the conduct and behaviour of the community members. The temple's Council of Elders is naturally extremely jealous of the good name of the community whether in India or abroad.

The procedure for the settlement of disputes is a simple one. Normally the aggrieved party lodges his complaint to the temple manager who sends word to the members of the committee concerned. The complainant and defendant are summoned to attend a Council meeting and the evidence is recorded by the temple manager. When final decisions are reached after weighing the evidence and hearing both sides of the dispute, they are conveyed orally and not recorded in writing. But in the case of certain major issues, once the conciliation is over and the disputants reach an agreement, their signatures are obtained to the final award of the Council. It is surprising how often the verdict is accepted by the disputants. On such occasions when the verdict is not accepted, the Council enforces its decree first by refusing to give flower garlands at the time of marriage (which means the marriage cannot be solemnised) and secondly by exercising the more severe power of ex-communication from the community. The influence of the Council of Elders in preventing needless, expensive and time-consuming litigation is noteworthy. This does not, of course, mean that in modern times there is no litigation among the Nagarathars. But its magnitude is considerably lessened because of the good offices of the Committee of Elders.

The kind of justice which is meted out by the Temple Council of Elders has an interesting history. In the olden days there were among the Nagarathars two kinds of Panchayats called *Madathu*

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Vasal Mariyal (*Mutt* or *Madam* or religious establishment panchayat) and *Kovil Vasal Mariyal* (temple panchayat). Both these terms denote a kind of protest in front of the Mutt and the Temple respectively. Only disputes between members of the same temple could be aired here. The complaint was usually raised by the plaintiff against the defendant with a witness in front of the temple. As soon as the plaintiff has made his complaint he was expected to go into his temple and write down the protest he had made. Then the temple authorities sent this information to the defendant who was expected to go to the temple with his reply, normally before it closed for the day. The temple authorities would then appoint a Committee of Panchayatdars or judges to go into the plaint and reach a decision. Until the decision was reached the defendant would be prevented from residing or taking his meal in the common choultry of the Nagarathars of that temple.

2. Temples and Trade

An interesting feature of the Nagarathars' business and religious life is reflected in the way virtually all the Nagarathars conduct their commercial transactions.

Whenever a new business was started a traditional Nagarathar would enter the credits in the new account first in the names of the God and Goddess of the temple, then in his own name, and last in the name of his village.

Apart from this, the Nagarathar businessman would set aside a certain amount or share as a fund in the name of God. There would be a separate account for this fund and sometimes a separate business also would be started from it in order to augment it. The Nagarathar businessman would evince as much interest in the business conducted in the name of God as in his own personal business concern.

Besides this, as noted earlier, a Nagarathar businessman would normally set aside a fixed percentage of the profits of his commercial undertakings for charity. This is called *mahimai*. From this income demarcated for charity the Nagarathars constructed in the old days temples dedicated to God Subramania in such new areas where they settled as Colombo, Rangoon, Singapore, Kuala

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Lumpur, etc. In India, these funds were usually utilised in repairing and renovating ancient Saivite temples and to underwrite the expenditure involved in certain periodical traditional festivals connected with and conducted by the Hindu temples. We have some evidence that this kind of charity to promote Hindu religious institutions was practised by the Nagarathars from at least the sixteenth century, if not earlier. As noted earlier, we have some information from the Palani temple records of a sixteenth-century Nagarathar named Kumarappan, a salt trader, who had set aside a portion of his income to the temple of Velayuthaswamy of Palani and its religious activities.

The local Nagarathar temples, apart from the nine major temples, play an important part in various village festivities. In addition to the numerous conventional responsibilities of the temples, they play a particularly unique role during weddings. The bride or bridegroom from another village will be invited first to the local temple to offer worship and only then to the house where the marriage function will take place (of tying the *thali* round the neck of the bride). These functions are called *Pennalayppu* (welcoming the bride) and *Mappilayalayppu* (welcoming the groom).

The temple halls afford a meeting place for the Nagarathars for various secular functions as well as weddings and religious discourses. The temple is used for dances, dramas, music, receptions, public lectures and general social gatherings.[43]

And last, these temples have proved to be a refuge not only to the Nagarathars but to all Indians during times of floods, famine and public disturbances. During recent anti-Indian riots in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, these temples provided not only shelter and food but safety from the violence of the local dominant ethnic groups. Thus the Nagarathar temples have played and continue to play a tremendous role in the economic, social and religious life of the Indian minorities abroad.

[43]The present writer has enjoyed the hospitality of the Nagarathars in their temples where he has addressed Nagarathar audiences in at least half a dozen countries overseas in South-East Asia.

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3. The Pulli System

Every Nagarathar temple in Chettinad maintains a register of all the Nagarathar marriages in the community under a system of classification called *pullis*. *A pulli* literally means a dot in Tamil.

A marriage between two Nagarathars can be solemnised only after receiving wedding garlands from the respective temples to which the families of the bride and groom belong. When a couple get married their marriage is recorded in a special Register (book) kept for the purpose in the temple (*Koil* or *Kovil*) in Tamil and with the recording of the wedding the couple become a full *pulli* in the record of the temple to which the bridegroom belongs.

The married couple (*pulli*) forms the social unit of the community, and each such unit has to contribute financially *pulli-vari* (dot-wise) and *asti-vari* (property-wise) for the maintenance of the temple.

In brief, only when a person becomes a *pulli* is he or she recognised as a bonafide member of the Nagarathar community. And what enables one to become a *pulli* is wedlock, registered in a temple to which the bridegroom's party belongs. Thus the *pulli* system is a temple-based registration of all Nagarathar marriages.

This is a remarkable institution, for among the millions of Hindus through the ages there has never been any official—governmental or religious—registration of the Hindu weddings on the lines of the Western system or in the way that the Christian and Muslim marriages are registered in India. The Hindu marriage has been purely a religious ceremony and the Hindu priest had no official status comparable to the Christian or Muslim priests in this matter.[44] It is commendable to note that the Nagarathars, who constitute such a tiny section of the Hindu population, are the only community in India, to the knowledge of the present writer, to have originated this fascinating practice of their temples keeping a record of all weddings of their members.

[44]In fact, the present writer has been pleading with the Government of India, both within Parliament and outside, for the compulsory registration of all the Hindu marriages, for legal, statistical and a variety of other purposes. But this plea has so far (1978) been in vain.

On the subject of compulsory registration o the Hindu marriages, see S. Chandrasekhar, *Population and Law in India*, 2nd ed. (Madras: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 56-59.

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A husband and wife with unmarried children will retain their *pulli*. The entire family is represented by the full *pulli* of the parents. The children on their marriage will become separate individual *pullis*. It may be noted that while a marriage between two Nagarathars gives rise to a new *pulli*, a marriage between a Nagarathar and a member of any non-Nagarathar caste group will not be taken into account and neither the groom nor the bride can become a *pulli*. This device is obviously to discourage inter-caste or inter-sub-caste marriages in the community.

There are two classifications of *pullis*, called *full-pulli* and *half-pulli*. The following come under the classification of *full-pulli*:

(i) Husband and wife with unmarried children.
(ii) Husband and wife without children.
(iii) Widower with or without children.
(iv) Widow with children.
(v) Children without parents.

Classification of *half-pulli*:

(i) Widow without children.
(ii) Widow with married sons and daughters.

The following illustrations may clarify the above classifications:

(i) Husband and wife with unmarried children constitute a *full-pulli*.
(ii) Husband and wife without issue also form a *full-pulli*. As parents have a right to adopt a child from their own temple circle who by wedlock may beget children and assure the continuance of the family tree, they retain *full-pulli* status.
(iii) A widower with or without children is treated as *full-pulli*, for there is a possibility for a widower to marry again. As he is already a recognised *pulli*, he will not be considered a new *pulli* and from this new alliance he may create new *pullis* through his children.
(iv) A widow with children is also considered a full-pulli so long as all her children get married. She is treated as a *half-pulli*

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only after the marriage of all her children, since by that time, she cannot remarry and her *pulli* cannot create any more new ***pullis.***

(v) Unmarried children (irrespective of sex) without parent will represent the *pulli* of their parents, as there is a possibility of the children forming new *pullis* by their eventual marriages. They retain the *pulli* of their parents before marriage. The *pulli* of the parents ceases to exist once all the children get married and the parents themselves pass away.

Half-Pulli

(i) and (ii) A widow without children and a widow with married sons and daughters are considered as *half-pulli*, since widows normally do not remarry and there is no possibility to create a new *pulli.*

Thus the above classification of a *pulli* is based on the possibility of creating a new *pulli* by that *pulli.* A *pulli* is treated as *full-pulli* as long as there is a possibility for that *pulli* to give rise to any new *pulli.*

A *pulli* is treated as *half-pulli* if there is no possibility for that *pulli* to give rise to any new *pulli.*

A *pulli* ceases to exist when the couple who formed that *pulli* are dead and there is no possibility of their *pulli* to give rise to any new *pulli.*

But the *pulli* system has certain limitations. It does not help us to obtain the precise total population of the community, as there is no way of calculating the number of children a *pulli* may have. But it does help us to reckon the trend of growth or decline and the overall demographic strength of the community in terms of families. On the basis of the average size of a family one can arrive at a rough total of the Nagarathar community's population.

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Some journals in the Tamil language which deal with Nagarathars include occasionally articles in English, but these have not been included in this bibliography as readers of this book will normally have no access to such Tamil periodicals.

These source materials have been classified and cross-classified under seventeen sections. While the first ten sections pertain to the Nagarathars and their economic, social and religious activities in India and abroad, the remaining sections are primarily concerned with their activities in Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and other areas. The section labelled 'General' consists of all the miscellaneous items not included in other classifications.

A companion volume to this book will shortly be published in Tamil. Its title will be நகரத்தார் ஆய்வுத்துணை நூற்றொகுதி (*Nagarathar Aivu thunai Nootrokuthi*). In this volume, a Tamil translation of the present writer's Introductory Essay on Nagarathars will be found along with an extensive bibliography on Nagarathars available only in the Tamil language. It is hoped that this companion volume will be found useful to all those who read primarily Tamil books.

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